

When my daughters were growing up, I used to read to them, and tell them stories before they fell asleep, about “when I was a little boy.” They never tired of listening to them.

When I Was a Little Boy

By Robert Gogerly

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Robert Gogerly

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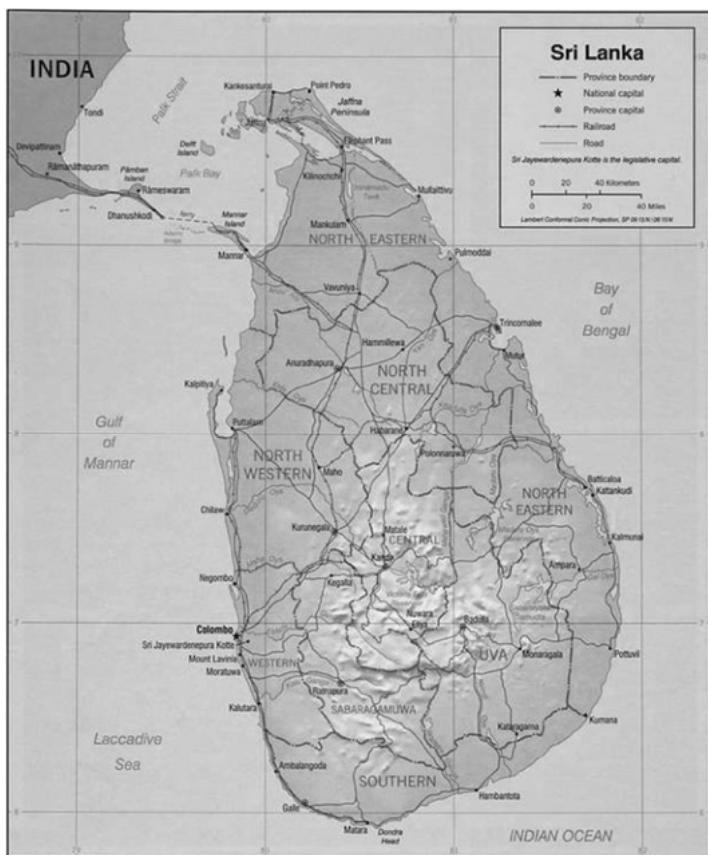
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WHERE IT ALL HAPPENED



Contents

Prelude	ix
Sleeping on the beach.....	1
Holidays at Uncle Ric's	9
Climbing Mountains	21
My Daddy is only a picture and The Lightning Express.....	31
Bullying at school.....	37
The Snake	41
Being a Boy Scout	51
Riding around Sri Lanka.....	57
Sinhalese Song.....	65
Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.....	67
Rickshaws and Buggy Carts	69
Raiding a Jak Fruit Tree	73

Robert Gogerly

Diving at the Reef for Lobsters.....	81
My first day at school	87
Curfew.....	91
I saw my mother's name.....	97
Galle Express	101
A woman sat on the graveyard wall.....	105
Reuben	107

Sleeping on the beach.

When I was a little boy I lived on an island far far away from Australia, called Sri Lanka, where there was no summer and winter. It was always hot there and there were only two seasons, the dry season and the wet season. It rained heavily in the wet season but it was still hot.

I lived with my sister Barbara, and my brothers Alex and Richard. I was the eldest in the family, then came my sister and two brothers Alex and Richard.

We often spent our school holidays at my Uncle Ric's home. He was a doctor and looked after hospitals in different towns where he was sent to, in Sri Lanka. He was the only one amongst all his brothers and sisters who had a car, and he would pick us up in his Chevrolet convertible and take us to his home for the holidays.

We always looked forward to our holidays at Uncle Ric's, because we always had fun and there were so many places for us to explore around where he lived.

There was the time that Uncle Ric was posted to Trincomalee a seaside town, as District Medical Officer and Chief Doctor of the town hospital. We waited impatiently to spend a school holiday there. Finally, the day arrived for the start of the vacation at the end of the semester, and he picked us up in his convertible Chevrolet and drove the 180 kilometres between Kandy in the hills and his house in Trincomalee on the coast.

The beach was not far from his house and it was not long before we were frolicking in the waves and picking oysters off the rocks close to the shore. At night we sometimes went down to the fishermen's boats resting in a row on the sand and climbed inside to sleep under the stars. No one seemed to mind. It was uncomfortable on the floor of the boat, but it was a small price to pay for falling asleep under bright

When I Was a Little Boy

twinkling stars bathed by the dreamy light of a full moon, lulled to sleep by the sound of waves breaking on the shore.

Stop for a moment, close your eyes, and listen. Can you hear it? We would occasionally see a shooting star streaking across the sky as we drifted off to sleep.

I remember one occasion when we did this. The four of us brothers and our sister were between twelve and sixteen years old. We were accompanied by Uncle Ric.

The arrival of the fishermen about 3 a.m. woke us from our dreams and we had to give up our beds for the night. The smell of the salty sea air assailed our nostrils as we stretched awake. The fishermen went out in two rows on either side of a vast net, rowing out into the sea spreading their net as they went. It was time for us to head back home to our beds to finish our night's sleep.

Then we woke at dawn and hurried down to the beach again. We could see the top of the nets, wooden floats

attached to it, bobbing up and down in the waves, the net was spread below the surface to trap their catch of fish for the day. The fishermen lined up on two sides of the beach and started hauling in the huge net. They chanted as they pulled in a halting rhythm, as each float reached their hands and they laid it with the net on the beach.

They swayed forward and back with each chant. One row chanted loud and clear, “O de elei!” The other row would respond, “Elei yah!”

“O de elei”

“Elei yah!”

“O de elei”

“Elei yah!”

Then the chanting got louder and changed to

“ELEI - ELEI”

“ELEI - ELEI”

“ELEI – ELEI”

“ELEI – YAH.”

The net was gradually dragged in as the sun rose seemingly lazily in the brisk morning air. Seagulls began circling above, calling out their cry of ‘Karr, Karr, Karr’ anticipating a morning meal of freshly caught fish. Little fisher folk children straggled onto the beach in scantily clad colourful clothes rubbing their sleepy eyes with the back of their knuckles, to watch their fathers, as entranced as we were at the ritualistic haul.

As the net piled up on the two sides of the beach, the end of the net was pulled in from the sea and began to appear, and silvery flashes of frantically leaping fish appeared.

Closer and closer the end was hauled up onto the beach. The murmur amongst the fishermen grew louder and louder as they were able to identify the fish

in their haul and point out the tuna, trevally, mackerel, and mullet.

On this morning the catch of the day happened to be two red ‘Snapper’ called ‘thabalayaa’ in Sinhalese. Ecstatic screams of, “THABALAYAA” rent the air, as they gathered around the net, now completely ashore. It was a good catch, and the excitement and anticipation of good sales at the fish market became evident in the chatter and laughter amongst the fishermen. The smell of the fish mingled with the salty smell of the sea.

Then it was time to divide the haul amongst themselves and haggle over who would get the thabalaya, and what fish to trade-off.

They carried their catch in two large baskets attached to a long pole at each end, slung over their shoulder, and headed off to the market to start a new day.

When I Was a Little Boy



Climbing Mountains

When we were little we used to spend the weekends climbing the mountains around Kandy where we lived.

There was one mountain called Hunnagiriya. It was supposed to be haunted at the top and the story was that at mid-day a ghost would appear if you were at the top at that time. We were curious about this and decided to climb it one day and see for ourselves.

We had chosen a cloudy day in June and had to climb through the jungle, the path leading over a small bridge beside a rock pool beneath yet another waterfall. The climb took us up the side of the waterfall. It began to drizzle, a fine misty rain. There were five of us on the climb, two friends the D'Abrera brothers, and us three Gogerly brothers.

The path was steep and slippery and Bernard tripped on a rock. "I've twisted my ankle!" He leaned against the branch of a tree and pulled his left ankle up with his right hand, bending down to massage it gingerly.

We stopped, waiting to see how bad it was. “It’s okay,” he said after a while. “Just gave me a bit of shock. I’m fine.”

We continued, having to pass through a row of tenement houses of Tamil plantation labourers imported from India to work on the extensive tea plantations. A little kid sat on a step in the front of one of the meagre houses with a black cat on his lap, watching us walk by. He must have been about eight and had a mop of unruly hair hanging over his eyes and a big toothy grin on his face as he watched us, stroking the cat. His mother must have been out picking tea with the rest of the crew. A couple of men were in a conversation in a doorway. Outside another house a black and white dog was wagging his tail furiously, trying to get at a mouse that had scampered between a rock and the step leading to the house. He was barking excitedly and pawing at the ground in frustration.

We walked on, up into a large tea plantation. Between the myriad tea bushes were raspberry plants laden with fruit. We picked handfuls and stuffed them in our shirts as we climbed. Scattered amongst the tea bushes lithe Indian women, carrying large cane baskets on their backs, were picking their quota of tea leaves for the day.

The correct way was to pick two leaves and a bud and throw it over their shoulder into the basket. They did this all day until their baskets were full and they would take it to the weighing station, to get their pay for the day. On this day the bushes were lush after the recent heavy rain, and you could tell it was a good crop and it wouldn't take as long as it usually did to fill their baskets. They wore colourful labourer's sarees, robes tucked in at the waist, and slung over their shoulder. They chattered amongst themselves, as they worked, and laughed at some joke they shared.

Then we entered a forest as we made our way to the crest of the mountain. It was raining steadily now as

we picked our way through wet undergrowth, little rivulets forming, across the track as we trudged. Rain slid down through the forest trees and birds settled on branches, as drops of rain dripped off their wings. We reached the summit about noon but the ghost must have had a day off because there were no rocks thrown at us.

A heavy mist lay over the valley below denying us a view of the vista that lay beneath. We were soaked. We ate our picnic lunch by a rock under a tree, and after a while started our descent.

Leeches inhabited the undergrowth and found their way onto us as we passed. Like little worms, they had three sucking lips, with which they would attach themselves to the warmest part of their host and feast on their blood.

Alex found one at the back of his knee and reacted, “Oww! I’ve got a leach!” he yelled.

“Don’t pull it off,” I said. “You know if you do it will never stop bleeding.” This is because leeches secrete an anticoagulant that keeps the blood from clotting and allows the blood to keep flowing until the leech is full. If you pull them off your skin it takes a long time for the bleeding to stop. And the site may get infected.

“I can’t just leave it there,” he said, “It’s creepy.”

“Don’t worry,” I replied, “I remembered to bring some salt.”

Salt was the solution to the problem, as leeches detach themselves if they are doused with salt. I took out the container of salt from my duffle bag and sprinkled some on the leech. We all gathered around and watched as the leech drew itself in, sort of scrunching itself up, before falling to the ground.

We used to collect butterflies and on the way down, just by the waterfall, we captured some specimens of what was known as the Tree Nymph. It was also called the ghost butterfly, a pale blue-grey large beauty with

black veins. It had a slow loping flight whence it got its name. This was the only location where this species could be found.

The rain had stopped and it had turned into a hot afternoon. As we walked down further we came across a wide pathway covered by packed white sand. Sleeping across it sunning himself on this lazy afternoon was a long brown snake. It was known to be non-poisonous but we gave it a wide berth as we walked past it.

We had eaten most of the raspberries we stuffed down our shirts and discarded the rest as we reached the main road and waited for the bus to take us back home.



The Tree Nymph butterfly

When I Was a Little Boy



Hunnasgiriya Mountain

Another mountain we used to climb was called Hantane and we used to climb it often. It was at the back of where we lived and we had to walk up several paths through tea plantations and little villages where the tea pluckers and others who worked on the plantations lived.

Hantane was very steep on one side with a sheer drop on the other, which we viewed as we reached the top. This was a crater formed in that location hundreds of years ago. We climbed our way past mountain creeks

and steep paths before we reached the grassy steep climb to the top. On the way down we often stopped by a pool at the base of a little waterfall and had a dip in the cool water before having our picnic lunch. Then it would be time to stretch out on a rock by the stream, fanned by a gentle breeze, and gaze up at the blue sky through the softly swaying branches of the tree under which we lay, watching white clouds drift away in a blue sky.

Sometimes on the way home, we would raid neighbours' fruit trees and stuff fruit down our shirts till we came back home and shared them. There were several kinds of fruit like jambu, juicy fruit like a little pear with pink skin and white inside. We had to make sure no one was home when we climbed the trees to pick the fruit.

There was an avocado orchard behind where some friends lived, and we often found avocados that had fallen off the trees. We would make piles of these and

When I Was a Little Boy

stack them beside ant hills, which we would hide behind and throw avocados at each other in a ‘war’!

One day Alex and I were throwing avocados at each other, and I stood next to an anthill and caught the avocados he threw at me and threw them back at him.

Then he threw a rotten avocado at me and when I caught it the rotten fruit splattered all over my hand and shirt! That was the end of the war!



Hantane

Galle Express

We were at the Mount Lavinia beach one evening and were playing around in a rock pool, with the waves breaking around where we were. The water was about knee-deep and there were little fish swimming around in the pool too,

“Look!” said Barbara, “There are little fish in here! They’re swimming around my legs”

Alex said, “I’m going to catch some waves,” and went over to the guy who was renting out surfboards.

“I’m coming too,” said Richard, and went with Alex.

I stayed in the rock pool.

After a while, Alex and Richard came back in. It was time to head back home.

As we walked to the edge of the beach towards the railway track we could hear the Galle Express as it sped through the Mount Lavinia station on its way to Colombo.

Then we saw something that made us freeze with concern.

A little black and tan German shepherd was on the tracks right in front of the train.

“Oh! My God!” shouted Barbara. “Look! That little puppy is going to be hit by the train!”

The train was moving too fast for the puppy to have time to get out of the way.

We couldn't bear to look, and there was nothing we could do. So we just looked away.

The train roared past, making that metallic grinding sound on the tracks, evidencing its great weight and power.

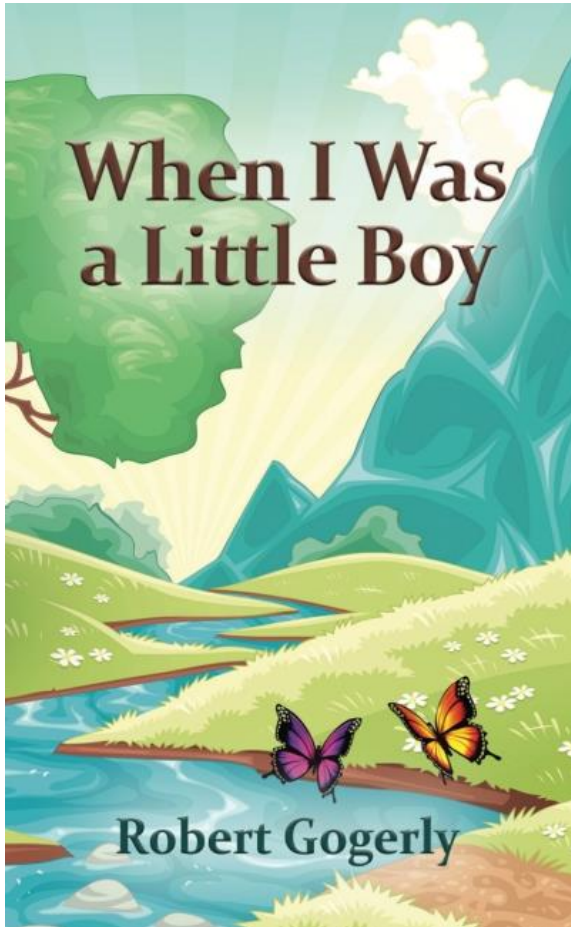
When it had passed, we dared to look on the tracks.

What we saw, we thought was amazing

The little German shepherd puppy had huddled down between the sleepers, while the train thundered over it, keeping its head down and out of the way.

When I Was a Little Boy

We went over to it and Barbara picked it up and cuddled it. It whimpered and licked her face, its heart thumping wildly in its body. Then when it realised it was safe, it started wagging its tail. Slowly at first, then wildly! What a smart little puppy!



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